

Arab Culture and English Literature: An Affinity

A Study,

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Abstract

The paper discusses the literary osmosis between Arab culture and English literature, more precisely it subtracts the issue of influencing and being influenced between the writers in the two cultures. As it shows the influencing on the Iraqi poet Badr Shaker Alsayab by the British poet T. S. Eliot, it also shows the influencing on Lord Alfred Tennyson by the Arabian poet Imru al-Qays. Many of Arab influences in the English literature are raised in this paper, in poetry also it discusses the influencing on the father of English poetry Geoffrey Chaucer by the *Arabian Nights* tales. In the novel, it discusses the influencing on Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* by the novel of Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*. In drama it discusses the influencing of the famous story in the Arab culture of the hero and beau Antar Bin Shadad on the great poet and playwright William Shakespeare especially in his play *Othello*, more comparisons are discussed in this paper. At the end of the study, we conclude that the modern Arabic literature influenced by English literature, the English literature is also influenced by the Arab literature in the middle ages. *The Arabian Nights* was influential on many writers in the English literature. The mainspring of the influence on English writers caused a renewal and development of English literature. The translation movement helped to make the Arab culture influential on the civilizations around, including the influencing on the English literature. The Orientalists contributed to transfer the Arab Culture to Europe via translation of the Arab literature to their languages, and more .other results are mentioned in the conclusion of the paper based on the literature

Introduction

Arab civilization contributed in the Middle Ages in literature, arts and thought as well as in science in influencing the civilizations around. Arab civilization has strong presence and prosperity which conduced to the entry of Arab culture to Europe by European Orientalists who provided for the transfer of Arab culture to their countries, besides the impact of Arab civilization on the people and their language, food, clothing, also has effected on English literature, as a European thinker says, 'If the Arabs did not appear on the stage of history, the European renaissance would delayed for several centuries'. Mainspring of the influence on European writers was to renewal and evolution of their literature as Dr. Youssef Ezzedine says, "Literary Osmosis is that develops the literature and saves it from deadlock", he also adds, "Literary Osmosis stronger in West than of us now, it started from the roots of Arab culture, interested in Arab Arts and

."Humanities and appeared in their poetry and prose literature

Arab heritage in Middle Ages was on a high level of prosperity and maturity and it occupied the foreground of the world at that time scientifically, culturally, intellectually and in Literature too. Thereby European and Oriental travelers led to establishing relations between East and West through translation via three routes; the Crusades, trade across the island of Sicily, and the Islamic conquest of Andalusia. In the Crusades alone (1096 - 1291 AD), the largest translation movement in history is known for over two centuries, where most of the Arab heritage and reference books were transferred to the west, allowing for Arab Culture to enter from a wide door to Western civilization, and keeps important significant impact which contributed to raise the prestige of cultural, scientific .and civilization of the West and lifted Europe out of the Dark Ages

The Role of Translation Movement

Translation Movement is the main factor that transfers the Arab Literature to Europe. The translation of *Alf Layla wa Layla* or *The Arabian Nights* or also *des Mille et Une Nuits* in French as it is translated first by the French Orientalist Antoine Galland (1646-1715) introduced *The Arabian Nights* to Europe and left a clear impact on the Western literature, and this impact was greater on English literature after Andrew Bell translated the tales in English which made orientation and modernity in literature. Also, the translation of *Mu'allaqat* or *The Hanging Poems*, (because these poems were hung on or in the Ka'ba at Mecca), translated by Sir William Jones, effected poetry and prose in English literature. These translations along with other effects contributed to the refinement of Western literature in spinning platonic love. *Troubadour* (lyric poetry) with its impact in English poetry is not different from its role in Europe, and the origin of this art, in fact, is from the Andalusian Muwashah and Zajal which have common features with *Troubadour*, and poets in both, are singing poetry from disinheritance more than from contact, and beloved remains truthful despite disinheritance, and this course of love was not known by the Latin tradition of thought as it is common in the Arab tradition.

Literary Osmosis in the Modern Arabic Literature

Literary Osmosis is also applied on the Modern Arabic literature, in poetry for example, some of Arab poets have been effected by English Romantic Poetry, they are; Abbas Mahmoud Al-Akkad, Ibrahim Mezni and Abdul Rahman Shukri. They also founded The Diwan School which appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, and calls to take advantage of English poetry. Also at the individual level, Badr Shaker Alsayab was attracted by T. S. Eliot as he said, "I admire Thomas Eliot, influenced by his style, no more".

In drama, George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* has clear influence on the Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim. Tawfiq al-Hakim watched it as a film and despite the fact that the play of Tawfiq al-Hakim had the same name, which Bernard Shaw's play afford, Hakim denies that he was influenced by Bernard Shaw's play. He says that the reason for the effect was due to the painting, "Pygmalion and Galatea" by the artist, Jean-Léon Gérôme, whom he admired. Whether the writer admitted it or not, the impact of Bernard Shaw's play on Tawfiq al-Hakim is clear when we compare the two plays.

Ghassan Kanafani in his novel *What remained to you* was Influenced by William Faulkner. Kanafani says, "For Faulkner I am very impressed with his *The Sound and the Fury*, I think this is true; I am very impressed with Faulkner, but in *What remained to you* is not effected mechanically by Faulkner, but it is an attempt to take advantage of the aesthetic tools and artistic accomplishments achieved by Faulkner for the development of Western literature".

POETRY

As I mentioned earlier, *The Arabian Nights* and the *Hanging Poems* attracted some of eminent English poets, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, the father of English poetry. Chaucer was influenced by *The Arabian Nights* in his poetic stories: "The Canterbury Tales", especially in the Squire's tale. The influence on Chaucer was not direct through the translation of *The Arabian Nights*, but even then he was influenced by it. The main factor to influence Chaucer was through his contacts with some of the pioneers of Italian literature such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Boccaccio for example, was influenced by *The Arabian Nights* in his allegory (*Decameron*) or *The Ten Days*. For the similarities, when we compare these two works, we find that the character Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights* resorted to tell stories, fearing the injustice of her husband who may try to kill her. Thus, other youth and women in the *Decameron* hid in a

rural palace, fearful of death and they eliminate the fear by telling stories, and this is what was revealed by some researchers when they studied *The Ten Days* allegory. As for Italian writers who lived at the same period with Chaucer, and how they were attracted by *The Arabian Nights*, is likely to be, as Muhsin Mahdi, the Professor of Arab Studies at Harvard University and an investigator of *The Arabian Nights* says that some European Orientalists who visited Cairo in eighteenth century, knew about the book and it was translated into their languages from hand-copied manuscript and they thought it was incomplete, so they came looking for a full copy of it.

Lord Alfred Tennyson was one of the poets who have been influenced by translation of *The Hanging Poems*. Tennyson read *The Hanging Poems* with its explanations by Zouzni and Tabrizi written in prose. The main effect on Tennyson in his poem "Locksley Hall" was in the standing on the ruins and describing it, which is existing in *The Hanging Poem* of Imru al-Qays. Here is a comparison between the translation and "Locksley Hall":

STAY!—Let us weep at the remembrance of our beloved, at the sight of the station where her tent was raised, by the edge of yon bending sands between Dahul and Haumel.

"Tudam and Mikra; a station, the marks of which are not wholly effaced, though the south wind and the north have woven the twisted sand."

Thus I spoke, when my companions stopped their coursers by my side, and said: "Perish not through despair: only be patient."

"A profusion of tears," answered I, "is my sole relief; but what avails it to shed them over the remains of a deserted mansion?"

"Thy condition," they replied, "is not more painful than when thou leftest Howaira, before thy present passion, and her neighbour Rebaba, on the hills of Masel."

“Locksley Hall” :

*Comrades, leave me here a little, while as yet't is early morn:
Leave me here, and when you want me, sound upon the bugle-horn.*

*'Tis the place, and all around it, as of old, the curlews call,
Dreary gleams about the moorland flying over Locksley Hall;*

*Locksley Hall, that in the distance overlooks the sandy tracts,
And the hollow ocean-ridges roaring into cataracts.*

Dr. Youssef Ezzedine explains many aspects of influencing “Locksley Hall” in his book, *The Impact of Arab Literature at Depths of Western Literature*.

In addition to the poets mentioned above, William Wordsworth in his poem “The Gipsy” narrates a carefree life of Arabic farmers. Among the early British authors, John Milton, Carew and John Donne were more or less attracted with the Arabic life style of the folds, sheep and farmers. Among the Romantic poets of England, Robert Browning is found highly enamoured with the Italic conjugal life and love for the art of the contemporary rulers which we can find in his poem “My Last Duchess”. Though America has a short history on the world map yet we find that Edgar Allan Poe, the eminent Romantic poet and multi-faceted genius was hypnotized with the Arab culture. His poems “The Haunted Place”, “Lenore” and “Eldorado” are based on Islamic legends. His poems “Al Aaraaf”, “Eldorado” and “Eulalie” are based on the description mentioned in the *Kuraan*. Moreover, his tales “The Cask of Amontillado”, “Ligeia” and “The Premature Burial” are purely the description of Arab Culture as Poe had studied

Kuraan very well. Other eminent American philosophers like Herman Melville, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Dylan Thomas, Ezra Pound, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Tennessee Williams etc. too have described Arabic art, customs, social life, rustic life and culture in their literature.

Novel

Besides *The Arabian Nights*, the novel *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* or *Living, Son of Awake* by Mohammad Ibn Tufayl (1100-1185 AD) have had an impact on English literature and was clearly shown in the first novel of English literature, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe as most of researchers say. Hayy Ibn Yaqzan was translated in 1671 by Edward Pococke - the son, who carries the same name as his father - the English Orientalist appointed as the first Professor of Arabic at the University of Oxford in 1636 AD. The father sponsored the translation of his son for Arabic Fiction. Hayy Ibn Yaqzan can be described as the researcher and Oriental thinker about whom Clifford Edmund Bosworth- the Professor of Arabic Studies at the University of Manchester- says, "It is the biggest deep philosophical work and has had ongoing impact on English literature and composition rational and intellectual in England and the West in general, as the hero of the story. Hayy tries to access to the religious-philosophical truth in research, its causes without the use of any broker from abroad. This work has been a rapprochement with rational thinking that has prevailed in the West in the eighteenth century".

In return to *Robinson Crusoe* and compare with Hayy Ibn Yaqzan we find these similarities: the space in the two novels is same; remote Island and one man tries to understand and explore all that surrounds, so in both novels there is one main character in similar circumstances. The secondary character also, which appear contingently in the island after the stability of the main character,

and the meeting of the two characters after a long period of isolation on the island - and all other similarities in the two novels are listed in the research, *Applied Approaches in Comparative Literature* by Majida Hammoud. When we look at the life of Daniel Defoe (1661 – 1731), we find that Defoe escaped to Spain (the homeland of Ibn Tufayl) for the fear of risk of exposure, including prison because he had participated in some revolutions that broke out in his turbulent era and he spent two years in Spain. So it is normal to be effected by the most famous novel at that time.

Drama

The great impact of *The Arabian Nights* did not stop at the names mentioned earlier, but it came to the great writer of English literature, William Shakespeare. Some scholars of the heritage of Shakespeare –including the British Orientalist Arthur John Arberry – said that the play of Shakespeare, *Othello* which revolves around the Moroccan noble man who strangles his wife, Desdemona because he thought that she betrayed him, and, when he observed his own error of doubts he killed himself at once for his sin, is similar to the story "Qamar-uz-Zaman and His Beloved", and the name 'Othello' is a distortion of 'Obaidullah'- the hero of the tale in *The Arabian Nights*. As well as when comparing *The Tempest* with the tale, "Island of Treasures" in *The Arabian Nights*, both are full of witchcraft and sorcery, and revolve around the Sultan or the Governor of the island where the devils and jinn (ghost) obey him.

In a comparative study, conducted by Professors of literature at the University of Taiz - Yemen, under the title, "From the Arab Desert to London Theatre: Shakespeare's *Othello* and Antar ibn Shaddad", the study investigates in the Arab story of Antar ibn Shaddad filled with manifestations of love with his beloved, Abla and also the knighthood in the hero, Antar, who has never

been defeated, and comparing this story with the play *Othello* by Shakespeare. The researchers found more than 70 similarities in two stories among them :

1. The story of Antar ibn Shaddad revolves in an atmosphere filled with wars, raids and battles between Arab tribes and the story of *Othello* revolves in an atmosphere filled with wars and battles between the State of Venice and the Turks.
2. Antar ibn Shaddad was a black Arab from one of the Arab tribes in the Arabian desert and Othello was also a black Arab from one of the Arab Maghreb countries.
3. Physical strength and skill combat made Antar "Hero of Abs and Adnan" whilst made Othello to be "the hero and commander of the Army of Venice".
4. Abla is the daughter of a supervising masters and notables of the Abs tribe and Desdemona is daughter of one of the dignitaries of the state of Venice.
5. Antar was able to acquire the heart of his beloved Abla as well as with Othello and Desdemona.
6. Marriage between Antar and Abla was the same as of Othello with Desdemona.
7. Tribe was amazed of Abla's love for black slave which is contrary to the customs of the tribe and royal people also were amazed of Desdemona's love for black slave - contrary to the customs and traditions of society.
8. Antar was famous in swinging his sword and for his glorious and heroic battles as well as Othello.
9. Chiboub, the friend of Antar is famous as a womanizer and a pauper, as well as Casio, the friend of Othello.
10. Chiboub, a close confident friend of Antar , accompanied in errands, dispersed only in the storm, as well as Casio for Othello.

A lot of other similarities are here that prove the impact of Antar ibn Shaddad on Shakespeare's *Othello*. And for how Shakespeare influenced by the story, is as the Orientalist E. L. Ranelagh said, "Petrus Alphonsi – born in al-Andalus in the 11th century – wrote a book named *Councils of Learners* and contained a multitude of Arab tales that later mingled in English literature in England and other European countries." Antar ibn Shaddad's story have great impact in the tales in Alphonsi's book. Ranelagh and Victor Chauvin agree that some writers such as Cervantes, Boccaccio, Chaucer and Shakespeare borrowed from Alphonsi's book which leads us to say that Shakespeare was influenced by the story of Antar ibn Shaddad. It is generally observed that Shakespeare's plays are not without glimpses of Oriental appearance. The Arabic names frequently mentioned in Shakespeare's plays from Arabia, Palestine, Egypt, Morocco etc. are examples to it.

Conclusion:

Arab literature influenced English literature in all the fields of literature - Poetry, Novel, and Drama. The Greatest influence was in the tales of *The Arabian Nights* and it influenced different eras of the English literature. The Orientalists contributed to transfer the Arab Culture to Europe via translation of the Arab literature to their languages. The mainspring of the influence on English writers caused a renewal and development of English literature. Crusades and trade across the island of Sicily and the Islamic conquest of Andalusia introduced Arab civilization to Europe. Literary Osmosis is a normal thing, as the Arab literature influenced English literature. Today the situation is different not only with Arabic language but with all of the other languages of the world also because the English people ruled over the world for several centuries

and made English an international language to develop their trade in the world. The influence of Arabic literature on English literature can be directly observed, or through other languages such as French, Italian, Spanish etc.

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